
WENDY DONIGER, *ON HINDUISM*LINDA ANNE HEMPHILL
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This selection of Doniger's essays divides into seven themed sections traversing definitions of Hinduism and its pluralism, concepts of divinity, attitudes towards gender, desire and its denial, animal metaphors, reality and illusion, and a final section on her debt to Orientalism. Doniger's essays are concerned with "questions that can't be answered, problems that can't be solved" (p.409), as represented in myths, "the narrative embodiment...of metaphors" (p.565).

Doniger's style is effortless as it encompasses the detail of so many aspects of her topics. The titles of a number of essays are simultaneously amusing and descriptive, for example, "You can't get here from there: the logical paradox of Hindu creation myths" (p.157). A careful definition is sharper for Doniger's turn of phrase. "This is a self-contradictory situation, another Möbius strip that folds back in on itself, a metaphysical martini with a twist" (p.34). Her description of an object, such as the Maheshvara image at the centre of Elephanta, can be concise yet intricate. "Here is a god who has gathered all his action into himself and remains completely latent, potential...he is a complete enigma" (p.155).

A recent issue of *South Asia* 37(4) included three articles on the controversy surrounding Doniger's 2009 work, *The Hindus: an Alternative History*. This publication, *On Hinduism*, has also attracted unjustified criticism from Hindutvavadis, or in "Khushwant Singh's wonderful term, 'Fundoos'" (p.573), the representatives of a brand of fundamentalism described by Doniger as "a fanatical disapproval of people, both inside one's own religion and outside, who deviate from a narrowly defined essence of that religion" (p.272-273). American influence on these views, via the Protestant tendency towards censorship, does not escape her notice. "Never before

has the old tension between the erotic and ascetic strains of Hinduism taken the form of one path telling the other path that it has no right to exist” (p.406).

Doniger’s chapter on the Shiva *lingam* expresses in microcosm this modern tension, describing attempts at censorship by a “bigoted and prudish political movement” (p.206). This censorship is directed towards views held by those for whom the *lingam* is not only an abstract *nirguna* symbol but is somatic *saguna* (p.204), but one aspect of a god “who has always gloried in ambivalence,...(is) like all the other contrasting aspects of the god...not in conflict but always simultaneously present, each illuminating the other” (p.206). While Doniger traces the influence that Muslim and English attitudes have had on Hindu interpretations, she also details “the discomfort caused by the phallic meaning of the symbol”, the *lingam*, in Hindu texts as early as the Upanishads. Such texts do not “deny that meaning” (p.198), do not insist as does the contemporary Hindutva faction that one interpretation “is *wrong*, and must be silenced” (p.205; emphasis in original). This historically recent attempt to impose a “sanitized ‘spiritual’ form of Hinduism” (p.204) finds success in forms of popular culture that employ epic and mythic tales, overtly or by suggestion. “Interesting bowdlerizations may be seen in *Amar Chitra Katha*” (p.283), in which “sexual squeamishness” (p.284) deletes any meaning from some sections, often while removing the myriad connections between mythic and epic characters and events. This is also the case with Bollywood’s often “rather lurid re-enactments of the sacred stories” (p.520). Yet previous generations of the audience for pictorial retellings and films remained fully aware of the expurgated elements of these popular renditions of and references to ancient tales.

This collection of Doniger’s essays will remind many readers of the influential work that initiated their own exploration of Hinduism, while for others, the scholarship evident in each essay will launch them on a similar journey. Doniger’s substantial and ongoing contribution to her field is evident in new publications, including those in Nussbaum and Doniger, eds., *Pluralism and Democracy in India: Challenging the Hindu Right*, Warner and Kennedy, eds., *Scheherazade’s Children: Global Encounters with the Arabian Nights*, and those appearing in *Festschriften* for Sudhir Kakar and for Stefano Piano. Doniger refuses to be cowed either by the Hindu Right or by considerations such as those raised by Edward Said’s criticism of

Orientalists, those “Westerners who study Eastern religions and societies” (p.564). The importance of a leading scholar taking a robust stand amidst controversy should not be underestimated. A lifetime of scholarship on Sanskrit sources is a firm base for yet further exploration, and Doniger is in the position in which her knowledge of Hinduism is both more extensive and better informed by primary texts than her vociferous critics care to admit. In India where all censorship as well as “all material art is fluid...Sacred literature is eternal in being handed down first from god to mortals and then from one mortal to another (the infinite *parampara*)” (p.516). The hallmark of Doniger’s scholarship is her making accessible as well as enjoyable so much of this vast body of literature. While this collection is undoubtedly excellent, her editors might note that these essays would have been assisted by the addition of the page numbers in the endnotes to each essay; particularly as the pages of the essays themselves are headed with the name of the book or the name of the section, but not with the name of the essay. This is a highly recommended read for the serious student of Hinduism.

WORKS CITED

DONIGER, WENDY, *On Hinduism* (2014) New York: Oxford University Press.

LINDA HEMPHILL, BA(Hons) DipEd MA DipHum PhD, has authored *The Bollywood Mythological*, Köln, Lambert Academic Publishing, 2009; *Australian Poems*, Köln, Lambert, 2010; journal articles on Indian film for *Asian Cinema* and *South Asia*; and numerous reviews for *South Asia*.